



BACKCOUNTRY

RURAL AMERICA STANDING STILL

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Vivie Behrens

*Dedicated to Lynn Schultz, Lara Behrens,
and the residents of
Dysart, Pennsylvania*

*Special thanks to my parents Amy & Thad Behrens, Steve Hoelscher, Eli Durst, and
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<http://www.viviebehrens.com>





















































































Project Statement

Backcountry: Rural America Standing Still

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Between a silver set of tweezers, my grandfather held a small yellow orb, about the size of a pebble, up to the light. “And that,” he said, “is the brain of a sunfish,” as he looked down at us, my sister and I, staring up in awe from his waist. On this particular day, his garage had the sour smell of dead fish, which disturbed its seemingly permanent scent, a combination of dog food, ammunition, beer, and fuel. The cement floor of the room features the faded bloodstains from the deer he skins each season, which he used to shoot himself, but now he just skins for neighbors, friends, and our family members, “you young kids.” On the fridge, which only contains green bottles of Hofbrau, he’s hung pre-teenaged pictures of me in plastic sleeves, alongside others of my dad and his brother holding up feathered carcasses of grouse and magnets that read “Keep Christ in Christmas,” “Support Our Troops,” and “I Love My Grand-dog.” On my birthday, he writes me a check for fifty-dollars, written in his standard all-caps handwriting, and signs a card my grandmother picks out with the same short, “Love, Pap.”

My grandparents have lived in a town called Dysart, a town with a population of 851, since the 1970’s in a house my grandfather built and outfitted with the help of the business passed down to him by his father, Schultz Company: Plumbing, Heating, and Air Conditioning. The walls of the house are covered with paintings of different kind of ducks, with a small postage stamp of the same image, mounted inside each frame, and my grandmother has covered nearly every surface in each room with small carved statues of angels and tiny plaques that tout various Bible verses in swirled cursive. Their house, and the town of Dysart itself, can only be

reached by travelling up a winding asphalt road called “The Black Snake,” which slithers past modest homes and stretches of corn fields speckled with the dark gray bodies of wild turkeys. While I grew up in Dallas, Texas, I spent nearly every Thanksgiving sitting in the backseat of a rental car as we scaled The Black Snake. We often drove at night, flakes of snow blowing towards the windshield, rising in the yellow headlights from the total blackness of the Pennsylvania woods.

In 2018, my dad’s sister got cancer, really bad, suddenly Stage 4 – in her colon, her bones, her sacrum – and on that year, I brought a camera with me to Thanksgiving. After dinner, the family gathered and danced on the green-and-pink floral carpet that’s always been in my grandparents living room, and I took a picture of my dad slow dancing with his ninety-pound sister in his arms, a can-light glowing over my aunt’s signature curly brown hair that she’s always loved. These pictures arose from an impulse to preserve, to halt the progress of my aunt’s looming mortality, to stop death in its tracks. I wanted to catch the quality of a place in which she still lived, perhaps to remember what the rooms and the town and my family members looked like while she lived among them. The camera, while inadequate, functioned as a tool to control, to dominate, forces beyond the human capacity to control, forces of nature which by rule insist on change. By photographing, I indulged both my fear and my love; I held on. But what exactly was I holding on to?

In the following two years, I returned to Dysart as a site of photographic inquiry because the town physically demonstrates the inclination to hold on and resist change. My photographs attempt to illustrate how maintaining aggressive sameness manifests in the collective imagination of the town, in the décor, conventions, and social values. My task in photographing Dysart was less so to “essentialize,” define, or criticize this specific town or rural mindset, but

rather to show how the physical characteristics of the place – the wilderness and the physical distance from others – contributes to the widespread subscription to dominant American social paradigms. There's a natural presence of fear living in the woods – the threat of a predatory animal, a power shortage, a car sliding across the ice – that heightens a sense of impending loss. This circumstance of constant physical endangerment, coupled with the diminishing infrastructure and economic vitality, that, as far as I observed, prompts a search for control that fuels certain American beliefs in patriotism, nationalism, and God. I created images that attempted to address this pattern, using signifiers like American flags, camouflage, taxidermy, and farmland, to recall symbols that preserve and uphold American conventions of normativity. By linking these icons to other images that illustrate a tenderness of familial connection and the undeniable beauty of the natural geography, I attempt to represent the landscape as layered with both rage and devotion, complicating monolithic understandings of contemporary rural America.